



# FACING CHANGES

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## **Divorce Group for Elementary Children**

### **Group Dynamics**

**Group Size:** This group should consist of no more than 6-8 students.

**Group Make-Up:** This group is for fourth and fifth grade students. It can be made up of both male and female students. The group could be adapted for younger students as well.

**Frequency of Meetings:** This group will meet once a week for eight weeks. Each meeting will be approximately 30 minutes.

**Advertising:** The counselor will introduce the divorce group by teaching a classroom guidance activity about family change. This activity will be presented to the whole fourth and fifth grades individually. The goal of this lesson is to help children of divorce or separation to identify that divorce is just one form of family change. It is at this guidance lesson that the concept of a divorce group will be introduced and an opportunity for children of divorce to sign up for the group will be provided. A sign up sheet will be handed out to all students, and students simply indicate "yes" or "no" regarding their interest in the group.

After this guidance lesson had been presented, fliers describing the upcoming group will be posted around the school campus. The counselor may also ask parents and the fourth and fifth grade teachers for referrals of students who may be suitable for the group.

**Screening Process:** It is important to individually interview all the potential group members, even if a student has voluntarily signed up for the group. In the interview, the counselor will provide the student with information about the group including format, goals, and typical activities of the group. Some possible questions to ask the student are:

- Are you comfortable in a group setting?
- What do you hope to gain from the group?
- What do you think you can offer the group?
- Will your parents consent to your participation?
- Explain and ask if the student can maintain confidentiality?

At the end of the interview, if the student still has interest in being a member of this group, direct the student to have a parent sign a consent form.

**Ethical and Legal Aspects:** Maintaining confidentiality is of the utmost importance in order for members to feel comfortable and develop trust within the group. In addition, due to the nature of the group, many personal feelings and situations may be shared, and thus, group members need to know that the information they share will be kept in confidence. For liability issues, the counselor should notify the principal, teachers, and parents of selected students at the beginning stages of forming a group.

**Overall Goals of the Group:**

- Prevent chronic emotional and behavioral problems that can result when children experience divorce in their families
- Provide the support of a group environment
- Facilitate the identification and expression of divorce-related feelings
- Dispel misconceptions about divorce and promote rational thoughts
- Teach and develop coping skills
- Enhance positive perceptions of self and families

**Week 1- Session 1**  
**Topic: Introduction to Group Work and Getting Acquainted**

**Objectives:**

1. To set rules and goals for the group.
2. To allow children to become better acquainted.

**Beginning**

*Icebreaker activity:* The first activity will be to foster communication and allow group members to get to know each other. The game is called "Find Someone Game". This game encourages members to socialize and begin to build cohesion.

- Each person writes on a blank index card three statements, such as a hobby, interest, vacation, etc about themselves. The cards get passed out so that everyone has someone else's card. The students must find the person on their card and then introduce him/her to the group.

**Middle**

*Discussion of group goals:*

It is important for the leader to explain the purpose of the group, which is to share privately about divorce. It is at this point that the leader can remind the students that everyone present has parents that are divorced which helps the students know that they are not alone. Let the children know that some of the things that will be discussed include how divorce makes us feel, what we can do about those feelings, and ways to learn from the experience. Indicate that the group is for each one of them to gain what they want from the group so that is why the goals are mutually decided on by all members of the group.

Have a go-around allowing every student share their ideas for goals. This encourages commitment and involvement toward open sharing. Some group goals may include:

- Confidentiality
- Listening to the person speaking
- No put-downs
- The right to pass when it is your turn to talk
- Every person is entitled to their own unique feelings

**Ending**

The closing activity would be to review what took place in today's group. Discuss the reason for the group and why the goals and rules are important to a successful group.

**Homework:** Explain that in most sessions the leader will give the children something to work on or think about before the next session. For next time, ask the students to think about the goals and rules that have been set and decide if there is anything that they would like to add.

## **Week 2- Session 2**

### **Divorce and Feelings**

#### **Objectives:**

1. To help children understand the different pictures of families.
2. To begin to help children clarify and understand their feelings about the divorce.

#### **Beginning**

*Introduction:* The counselor reviews the goals that the group established and asks if any members came up with any additional goals or rules they wanted to include.

*The House My Family Lives In:* This activity is designed to allow the children to share their stories about who they live with and whether they live in two homes. This activity helps to promote the acceptance of many complexions of family. It also allows the children to identify similarities between themselves and other group members.

The counselor begins by showing a drawing of his/her family and house made prior to the session. The children would then be given a chance to draw pictures of their families and homes to show who they live with. The children will be given an opportunity to share their pictures and stories with the group.

- Discuss that they can still love family members even if they live in different homes.
- Family members love them just as much even when they live in different homes.
- It is okay to have two homes!

#### **Middle**

*Creating "Feeling Thermometer"* This activity is to help the children understand that people react to divorce with many different feelings and everyone's reaction is okay. The feelings may include anger, sadness, fear, or unhappiness. Children are asked to add feelings to this list. A discussion follows about what divorce means and the emotions that creates. They are then asked to pick their top five feelings from the created list and make their own personal feeling thermometer. The feeling is written at the top and then the thermometer is colored in to show the intensity of the emotion. The higher the color the "hotter" or stronger the feeling.

#### **Ending**

The counselor summarizes the discussion from the day and asks what the children learned about their feelings today.

**Homework:** The counselor asks the children to write down any feelings they have about their parents' divorce during the coming week and what might have caused it. They are invited to bring any notes to the next session.

### Week 3- Session 3

#### Divorce and Feelings Continued

##### Objectives:

1. To continue identifying the feelings surrounding divorce.
2. To encourage the expression of feelings.
3. To build connections and learn that they are not alone.

##### Beginning

The *opening activity* will be to review the feeling gauges and invite children to share feelings that came up for them during the past week. They can use their gauges to identify which feeling is the most prevalent for them at that moment or during the past week.

*Read a Story:* Dinosaurs Divorce by Laurene Krasny Brown, to stimulate discussion of divorce and answer questions. This will lead into the middle activity.

##### Middle

*Finish the Sentence Game:* The counselor has a list of sentences that were developed prior to the session. These sentences will be used in a go-around format for the children to complete. Each child can answer or pass on any statement. The following is a sample list of statements:

- After I learned about my parents' separation or divorce I mostly felt....
- Right now I feel....
- Sometimes I feel....
- It is hard for me to....
- I am angry that...
- I feel sorry that....
- I worry that...
- The worst thing for me is....
- It would help if....

The counselor should use this activity to stimulate discussion that will link members with each other and help them realize they are not alone. It will encourage members to bond and find ways to empathize with each other thus creating an environment of support.

##### Ending

*Story Time Game:* This activity wraps up the session by giving each person a chance to add to the story something they learned from the session today. The counselor starts the story by saying a sentence related to a topic covered today. It then goes around the circle with each person adding a sentence after repeating what was already stated.

## Week 4- Session 4

### Divorce and What to Do about It

#### Objectives:

1. To help children learn coping skills and how to cope with feelings and problems specific to divorce.

#### Beginning

Start with a review of the previous session and check for any issues that came up for the students in the last week.

*Opening Activity.* Read When Mom & Dad Divorce, A Kid's Resource by Emily Menndez-Aponte. This book will begin to explore ways that kid's can cope with their feelings and provide ideas of positive behaviors.

#### Middle

##### *Generating Coping Behaviors:*

1. Using the problems and ideas generated in the above story, the counselor asks the children to complete the following sentence fragment: "When I feel angry, frustrated, and unhappy (or any other emotion the children wish to use), I can \_\_\_\_\_." The children then list ideas that can help them feel better, but are not hurtful to anyone else. Constructive suggestions would include listening to music, reading, going for a walk, or other exercise, playing a favorite sport, singing, calling a friend or grandparent, playing with friends, etc.
2. Students choose several of the suggestions to role-play together.
3. The counselor discusses the importance of children taking good care of themselves and their emotions by choosing healthy habits of sleep, exercise, and nutritional eating. In addition to these healthy habits, participating in the above coping ideas will help them to feel better, even if their life is not necessarily resolved the way they may want.

#### Ending

The counselor reviews what was discussed during today's session and invites each student to identify one coping strategy that they believe could be helpful to them.

#### Homework

The counselor suggests that the students practice the coping strategy of their choice sometime during the upcoming week. The students could also practice telling themselves and another person how they feel once a day during the week.

## **Week 5- Session 5**

### **Coping Skills and Choices**

#### **Objectives:**

1. To continue to explore how to cope with feelings associated with divorce
2. To begin thinking about choices and decisions of one's actions and behaviors

#### **Beginning**

The counselor opens with a discussion about the homework. Who practiced a coping behavior from our session last week? Did anyone practice telling someone how you felt? How did it feel when you did that?" etc.

Use a game from the "Feelings Playing Cards" to help the students express their emotions at the present time.

#### **Middle**

Stimulus Activity: Play "The Acting, Feeling, Choosing Game" by Keat, 1978. This game will help to continue to develop a list of divorce-related problems and possible solutions. The time will be used to brainstorm and role-play feelings and coping behaviors. The game fosters attention to emotions, learning about divorce, positive relations with others, and guidance of healthy actions and behaviors.

#### **Ending**

Review what the children learned today through the games that were played.

#### **Homework:**

Ask the children what they would be willing to work on during the coming week and if they would be willing to share how it went at the next session.



## Week 6- Session 6

### Personal Strengths and Support Systems

Objectives:

1. To help children develop rational, positive thoughts about themselves and divorce.
2. To identify sources of support.

#### **Beginning**

Open with a short discussion of how the week went for the children inviting them to share any positive experiences using their coping strategies.

*Self-Portrait Activity.* The counselor has the children draw self-portraits (have a mirror available). Somewhere on the picture the children write positive, rational statements about themselves. These can include things the children are good at. Each child has a chance to read their list to the group and then group members can add ideas to each child's list. The counselor should provide an explanation how positive images and thoughts about our identity can promote feeling well about who we are and expressing that to others.

#### **Middle**

*Support Tree* pictures. The children are asked to draw a picture of a tree with limbs. On each limb they can write the names of people in their lives that are supportive of them. If they need help, suggestions include parents, grandparents, and other relatives, friends, neighbors, teachers, school counselor, pastor, etc.

During this time have a discussion of how these people can provide support to them. Remind them that a social support system are people that:

1. They can talk to when they want to share their feelings
2. Do something fun with, a hobby or game
3. Write a letter to.
4. Volunteer to help one of these people. Explain that when we are helpful to others that can often help us to feel better.

#### **Ending**

Summarize the lesson by reminding the children to focus on positive, rational traits about themselves. Remind them of the supportive strengths in their lives.

Do a go-around asking each student to name one positive thing they learned about themselves today.

#### **Homework**

The children should look for positive self-statements that they can add to their self-portraits. Encourage them to tell someone else something that he or she likes about himself or herself during the week.

## Week 7- Session 7

### Clarifying Attitudes on Divorce

#### Objectives:

1. To help children clarify attitudes toward divorce and reduce irrational thoughts.

#### Beginning

*Opening Activity.* Students discuss any new additions of positive self-statements for their self-portraits from the past week. They can also share any reactions or experiences about telling someone else a quality that they liked about themselves.

#### Middle

*Stimulus Activity: "Quiz" on Beliefs and Attitudes about Divorce.*

Counselor hands out the following quiz to the children. Each statement is read aloud as the children mark either "A" for agree or "D" for disagree.

1. ☐ Once people marry they should never get a divorce.
2. ☐ Sometimes, when parents divorce, it is the children's fault.
3. ☐ Children from divorced families can be just as happy as children whose parents are married.
4. ☐ If children promised their divorced parents that they would be very good, they might be able to get them back together.
5. ☐ It is better for parents to divorce than to fight everyday.
6. ☐ A parent who does not live with the child can still love him/her very much.
7. ☐ All kids whose parents are divorced get into more trouble at school.
8. ☐ It is better not to tell anyone if your parents are divorced.
9. ☐ It may be good for the children to live half of their time with their dad and half of their time with their mom.
10. ☐ When parents divorce, it is a very difficult time for the whole family.

The group discusses any statements of agreement or disagreement, allowing each child to have their own unique feelings. But, the counselor gently corrects any maladaptive beliefs or attitudes. This activity again allows for children to make connections with other members.

#### Ending

The counselor asks the group one new thing they learned from the "quiz" today. Also invites them to share one thing that helps them to feel better about what they learned.

#### Homework

The children are asked to choose one item from the "quiz" and discuss it with their parent or parents during the week.

## Week 8- Session 8

### Group Closure

Objective:

1. To increase the positive ways in which children think, act, and feel about their families.
2. To wrap up the group.

### Beginning

Review how the students' week went and what it was to like to talk with their parents about divorce.

#### *Opening Activity. Family Shield*

Each child draws a family shield and divides it into five sections. Children are to draw pictures or make statements in each section related to the following topics:

1. Their family and one positive thing about them
2. A positive time you had with your family
3. An unpleasant time you had with your family
4. One way to cope with an unpleasant family experience
5. Something you would like to see happening in your family in the next year

The counselor asks volunteers to share their shield with the group. This activity should tie into the house picture from the first session about who and what their families look like.

### Middle

*Unique Star Activity.* Each child is given a large six-pointed star design. Students will fill in each point of the star with pictures or words that are unique to them. The center of the star should include a picture of the student (perhaps a photo taken by the counselor earlier, or a drawing). The spaces in the points are:

- Something learned in group
- Your friends and support group
- Your Family
- Hobbies, interests and positive things about you
- A positive thought he or she keeps in his or her mind most of the time
- One or several coping skills you learned

Decorate the star anyway they like. Ask students to share their stars with the group. Each star is unique and represents positive characteristics in their lives that they can review after group is over.

### Ending

The group concludes with a go-around activity of the following statements:

I learned \_\_\_\_\_. I feel \_\_\_\_\_. Divorce makes life different by \_\_\_\_\_. I wish I could \_\_\_\_\_. Divorce is tough but \_\_\_\_\_ to help me cope. A good thing that has happened is \_\_\_\_\_. I have changed by \_\_\_\_\_ and something I want to keep working on is \_\_\_\_\_. The best thing I know is \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Resources utilized to develop and adapt the group sessions.**

Crosbie-Burnett, M., & Newcomer, L. (in press). Group counseling with children of Divorce: The effects of a multimodal intervention. *Journal of Divorce*.

Keat, D. B. (1978). *The acting, feeling, choosing game: A multimodal game for children*.

Harrisburg, PA: Professional Associates.

<http://www.childrensinstitute.net/programs/CODIP/>

Ice Breakers [www.Training-Games.com](http://www.Training-Games.com)

Lewis, P.H. (1991) *Bright Ideas Self-Concept Calendar*. McDonald Publishing Co.